



Humanism: The Greatest Technological Advance in Medicine*

Anthony P.S. Guerrero MD**

**Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics
University of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine**

According to a web-based dictionary (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/humanism>), humanism means concern for human interests, values, and dignity. It implies taking care of those things that make us uniquely human: our feelings and sense of self-worth, and capacity to care for one another. It is identified as being of utmost importance to the care of the sick. This may seem like an obvious and over-emphasized principle. But why, exactly is humanism so central to the practice of medicine?

Those entering medical schools are fortunate for the opportunity to study medicine at a time when technology has enabled humans to live longer and healthier than ever before in evolutionary history. Perhaps the first-year students feel additionally privileged to be able to study medicine in the new, technologically superlative facility in Kakaako, which is credited to the remarkable vision of the school's leadership. It is envisioned that this venue will help JABSOM achieve a new standard of excellence in the future of medicine.

To the Class of 2009, I want to leave you with two take-home messages: The first is that humanism saves lives by identifying and caring for the most serious causes of death and suffering in the world; and the second is that humanism saves lives by allowing professionals to work in teams that can provide safe and effective medical care.

One in three people in the world die prematurely because of malnutrition. More than 5.5 million children under age 5 years die every year. (<http://www.bread.org/hungerbasics/international.html>) What is especially distressing is that, even though technology and the resources exist, somewhere in the world, to help the hungry, war and other human-made injustices perpetuate suffering from preventable causes. In the United States, the top two leading causes of death among children, ages 1 to 19 years, are accidents and homicide (MacDorman et al, 2002)³. Homicide is often related to violence within the family. In spite of being able to reduce childhood deaths from mumps, measles, and other vaccine-preventable illnesses, there are still ways to go before childhood deaths from these other seemingly preventable causes can be reduced.

The first take-home message: "Humanism" both challenges and empowers to confront these difficult issues in medicine. Being a humanistic physician means having unconditional compassion towards those who suffer, physically or emotionally. It means caring for patients and their families and striving for healing, not just physically, but with all of those things that make us uniquely human. Through compassion, future physicians will one day be able to address effectively all of these most serious causes of suffering and death – among individual patients and their families, and in the global community.

Though human brilliance and modern technology have helped to outsmart bacteria and viruses, cancers, and other illnesses, it is still remarkable how much more needs to be achieved in eliminating other causes of human suffering.

The second take-home message: Techniques in medicine are lifesaving, and nearly perfected, after centuries upon centuries of development. But even then, things are not totally perfect. How often are mistakes occurring in the practice of medicine? This is a very sensitive topic, and not necessarily the most comfortable, to think about in the first week of medical school – but an important one, nonetheless. Many have heard about how safe airline travel is, and how much safer it is than travel in an automobile. How much safer is airline travel than receiving care in a medical center? 98,000 deaths in the United States are attributable each year to medical errors -- according to the Institute of Medicine (1999). This would be equivalent to 270 passengers dying every day from an airplane crash, in this country alone. This is a sobering statistic, but one which gives the medical profession hope that perhaps, with lessons learned from the airline industry, medicine can be made as safe and as close to perfection as airline travel.

The airline industry achieved such enviable statistics by building systems that rely on technology, that use checks, double-checks, and triple-checks, all in the name of safety. But the most important element of their safety system is teamwork. Protocols dictate professional interactions among team members in cockpits and air traffic control towers. It is this same professionalism and teamwork that saves lives in the airline industry that can also save lives in medicine. It is becoming increasingly recognized how disruptive, unprofessional behavior among members of a medical team can increase the risk of error and ultimately adverse patient outcomes. Sometimes – but perhaps not always – these adverse consequences of drama-driven behavior on patient outcomes are seen on prime time T.V. shows.

So the second take-home message is to be humanistic not just with future patients and families, but with all colleagues, beginning with classmates in PBL tutorials. Create a climate of collegiality that will eventually help to save lives while working with teams of people. Remember to always ask: would my behavior be appropriate for a cockpit or air traffic control tower, with hundreds if not thousands of lives at stake, or would my behavior be a set-up for an airplane to crash?

Humanism, as ancient as it may be in our tradition, is the greatest of all technological advances in medicine. With the white cloaks of compassion to remind you of the role as healers, strive -- in these next four years -- to develop the highest level of humanism towards

patients, patients' families, and colleagues to heal effectively human suffering in all of its forms and wherever it may be encountered, and so that working among colleagues, you will achieve the highest level of excellence and perfection in medicine.

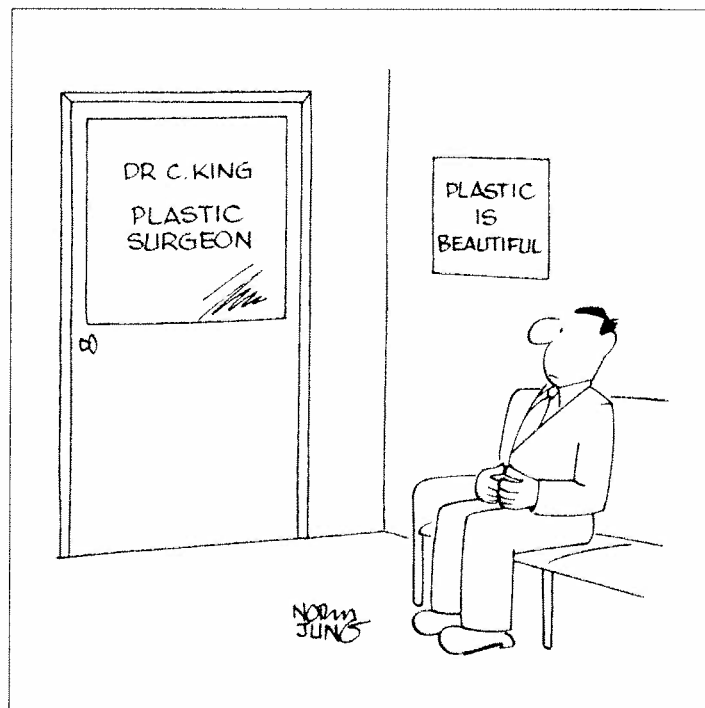
Congratulations on your inauguration into the medical ohana.

References

1. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/humanism>
2. Kohn LT, et al. Eds. To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System, Institute of Medicine. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 1999:1-14.
3. MacDorman MF, Minino AM, Strobino DM, Guyer B. 2002. Annual Summary of Vital Statistics - 2001. Pediatrics. 2002; 110: 1037-1052.

* Address delivered on August 5, 2005 to the JABSOM Class of 2009, White Coat Ceremony, Hawai'i Prince Hotel.

** Selected by JABSOM's faculty and students for the annual 2005 Humanism Award.



Street navigation solutions for people on the move.



▲ StreetPilot 2720



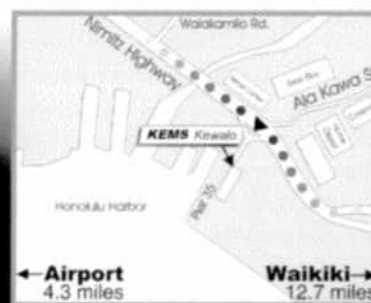
▲ C-Series StreetPilots



▲ iQue M3

- Hawaii street maps
- Turn-by-turn voice prompted directions
- Color touch screen interface
- Five million-plus points of interest
- Auto routing
- iQue M3 doubles as a Pocket PC

GARMIN



Available now at

KEMS Kewalo

965-A4 N. Nimitz Hwy.
Honolulu, HI 96817-4572

Phone: (808) 521-0902

E-mail: ecity@pixi.com